TO: Members of the Faculty
FROM: Jill Dolan, Dean of the College
RE: Assisting Undergraduate Students in Distress

March 18, 2024

As spring semester classes resume, I write to remind you of our policies and procedures for academically supporting students in distress and/or experiencing difficult personal situations. Responding to students with empathy and understanding is key. At the same time, we urge you to uphold policies that preserve academic standards and that ensure equity.

Some students disclose their circumstances to confidential University resources, including Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS), SHARE (Sexual Harassment/Assault Advising, Resources, and Education), or McCosh Health Services. In some cases, a student might let you know they’ve contacted these offices and might request your assistance or ask you for relief from certain academic course requirements.

I realize it can be difficult to respond to such requests in a way that balances compassion and fairness. Understandably, we often want to directly assist undergraduate students who are in distress. But as with all requests for exceptions to our centralized procedures, we need to ensure equity of access and consistency of processes and standards. Although it sometimes feels counter-intuitive, it’s important not to make allowances on an ad-hoc basis, even for students about whom you worry most.

If a student comes to you in distress, citing personal, mental health, medical, or sexual misconduct-related issues, please don’t act independently. (If you have questions about reporting obligations with respect to sexual misconduct, please see these FAQs/reporting guide.)

If you have immediate concerns about a student’s wellbeing or safety, please contact the Department of Public Safety (911 from any campus phone or 609-258-3333 from a cell phone) or the assistant dean for student life in the student’s residential college. (See this webpage for a list of residential college contacts.)

If a student in distress asks you to adjust your course requirements, please first contact the student’s residential college dean, who can guide you through assisting your student within our established processes and policies. (Each undergraduate student’s residential college affiliation is listed on your class roster.)
The dean and assistant dean for studies in the residential colleges are best positioned to work with you to create a reasonable plan for the completion of your student’s work. They have access to facts and extenuating circumstances about our students’ lives to which faculty might not be privy. Their involvement allows us to address the student’s requests in an informed, comprehensive manner.

While this might sound cumbersome or unfeeling, we’re not asking you simply to shunt your student off to others. Instead, our centralized policies for undergraduate students experiencing personal difficulties—and for students with disabilities and those involved in Title IX investigations—align with federal and state laws.

The University is required to provide certain accommodations/supportive measures related to disability and Title IX that we need to track and document. Our policies also align with the University’s commitments to diversity and inclusion, to student success, and to the integrity of our academic program.

We strive to ensure equal access to our academic programs for all students, while upholding our essential educational requirements. All undergraduate students, regardless of distress or disability, are expected to abide by academic and other University regulations and to fulfill the academic requirements established by the University.

Academic accommodations or supportive measures, even those required by law, must be reasonable, and should not be misunderstood as exemptions from deadlines or course requirements. For example, the inability to attend class on an ongoing, regular basis—regardless of the reason—cannot be accommodated. If you note a pattern of persistent absences, please contact the student’s residential college dean, who can advise you and your student about the best way forward.

We offer many forms of support to students who are struggling and appreciate your help directing them to resources that can help them meet their academic obligations.

If an undergraduate student has a chronic, ongoing condition or disability, they might be approved for academic accommodations through the Office of Disability Services (ODS). After ODS approves accommodations, faculty are notified and asked to work with their departments to implement the plan. Faculty should not, however, provide accommodations independently. You recently received a separate memo describing ODS’s accommodation policies and processes; it can also be found here.

I have also attached a memo describing our online Academic Early Alert system. The system offers a convenient way to notify residential college advising staff about a student in your course who might benefit from additional academic resources and support.
Please do make this information available to all teaching and lab staff, including graduate student instructors. If you have any questions or would like more information about the University’s support services, policies, procedures, and practices for our undergraduates, please don’t hesitate to contact me directly (jsdolan@Princeton.edu) or to reach out to one of the residential college deans.

I appreciate your desire to help undergraduate students in distress while remaining fair to all the students in your courses. And I know how much we want all our students to thrive academically and personally here at Princeton.

I hope these notes offer some clarity. My office is happy to support you as you address situations you find worrisome.

Thanks for your partnership here and always.

With my best wishes,

[Signature]

CC: Anne Caswell, Senior Associate Dean of the College
Residential College Deans
Residential College Assistant Deans of Studies
Residential College Assistant Deans of Student Life